

The Three Crises Of The Negro Intellectual

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The original title I had intended was "The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual." By definition for me a crisis is momentary. A crisis arises as a result of longstanding forces and evolving circumstances. It is a moment in which the interactions of these forces and events have led to a volatile, unstable situation with foreseen and unforeseen dangers, where all possible choices (including inaction) entail horrendous consequences, and suitable solutions are unimaginable or inaccessible. A crisis does not last; a crisis does not continue; a crisis quickly becomes a new status quo. More importantly, it is my thesis that African American intellectuals now face an unprecedented and unanticipated crisis. An utterly new situation which is inevitably volatile and temporary. A crisis for which I can foresee no constructive solution.

I thought that my title would excite curiosity on two counts. Why had I appropriated the title of Harold Cruse's famous tome? And why had I done so even though it uses the repudiated term, 'Negro'? I specifically want to restrict the idea of a crisis in a way which excludes Cruse's invaluable insights. I wish to suggest that Cruse was describing not a crisis but perennial dilemma. Discussing the fifty years from the 1920s to the 1970s, Cruse minutely described the intellectual commitment to integration, especially of the elite by the elite and for the elite. He also described the permanent minority commitment to various forms and degrees of separation.

Endarch, Journal of Black Political Research Spring 1997, pp. 1-13
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Though he is admirably thorough in indictments of the hypocrisies and intellectual penury of many intellectuals, within and outside the Marxist ranks, the essential parameters, the intellectual conundrum he described, despite many permutations, reached no climax and developed into no crisis. Throughout this period the academic community and - a more diffuse concept - the intellectual community always thought there were competing viable conceptualizations of African American status and agenda. Even the legislated reversal of statutory segregation was perceived as a victory and vindication of commitment to integration, rather than a new intellectual challenge to redefine premises, issues and goals. On the contrary, I submit that there have been only three intellectual crises for African American intellectuals, and that we are now in the worst.

As for the term, 'Negro,' I use it to emphasize a peculiar facet our identity which is obscured by any other name. Indeed I suggest that the reason we have so ridiculously demanded one appellation after another throughout this century is precisely because of our refusal to face the single defining fact of our identity.

By an intellectual crisis, I mean a moment when, through the course of real events, schools of thought, ideologies, even mere rationalizations, have become discredited, untenable, incredible, disproved, and finally harmful; a moment when some fundamentally new prescription is needed, because all existing ideologies clearly foster deleterious trends and results. Religions which predict the date for the end of the world, and see that date arrive, face an intellectual crisis. A lawyer who with magnificent success devotes his life to dismantling legislated segregation, and finds that his victory makes the society more segregated than ever - such a Supreme Court justice faces an intellectual crisis. A whole community faces an intellectual crisis, when all the ideologies available in that community are discredited. The community I have in mind does not include all African Americans in academic institutions. I mean academics along with all others who consider themselves committed to erudition (knowledge) and abstract reasoning. This includes our great tradition of autodidacts as well as those who acquire their learning in religious communities.

Although I am about to describe the crisis that I believe we face, I do not have the extra gall and idiocy to think that I have an answer to the crisis. My objective is colossal but simple: I only wish to suggest that African Americans are now in an unprecedented intellectual environment.

Our first intellectual crisis came at the end of the eighteenth century; the second at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the 20th, and, of

course, the third comes at the end of the 20th century. In the second half of the 18th century American metaphysical discourse defined itself by two schools of theology, both, of course, derived from Europe. One was decidedly Christian and manifest in very distinct religions which, from this distance seem rather similar. The other was 'deism', the notion that although the universe was created by God, He, after bestowing this benefice on one of its species, humankind, withdrew into absolute non-interference. It is from this school of thought that Thomas Jefferson derived his theories of human equality and a universal right to liberty. It should be obvious that both of these doctrines were anathema to Christianity, from the beginnings of Christianity until the 20th century. It is also clear that Christians and deists managed coexistence by judicious silences, mutual accommodations, and practical tolerance. In the course of the colonists' rebellion from the legitimate authority of their king and parliament, the Africans among them appealed to deist principles such as those stated in their manifesto of independence. But such luminaries as Jefferson were adamant and absolute in excluding us from their concept of universal humanity. Their position was founded on a concept of Africans as an inferior sub-species related to the human species. It is common to claim that this position was merely an excuse for the exploitation which was already becoming unprecedented in human history. This accusation is vitiated, however, by the fact that all those who opposed slavery held the same convictions of our inferiority. And incidentally it is worth mentioning here that no accumulation of individual achievements against any conceivable odds could threaten this knowledge. The cases of Phillis Wheatley and Benjamin Banneker show how incredulity can triumph over any facts.

If the deists had to circumvent their theories in order to deal with the reality they knew, the Christians had no such problems. The New Testament explicitly accepts slavery without defining any basis for enslavement. Nor does it offer any other principle of human equality, except, and this is critical, the possibility of sanctification through faith. Thus for the African intellectuals in America, the choice was inevitable. Christian doctrine, which offered no support of their political and social rights, was nevertheless the forced choice because it offered the only equality the culture did contemplate. There was another inhibition. Deism was an option open only to the elite. Anyone outside the most privileged class who was not a Christian would be a reprobate atheist, and if the person was non-white, an incorrigible, barbaric heathen as well.

But by 1787, Christian practice had hardened. We were reduced to

total and symbolic subordination within the spiritual union, the Church. This created the first of our intellectual crisis. Both deism and Christianity declared unequivocally our exclusion from the human community. In other words there was no ideology available, no school of thought, no frame of reference, no intellectual tenets current in the society to which we could repair. Theoretically Africans could have declared a pox on both houses, denouncing the hypocrisy of deists while espousing their doctrines, and renouncing a religion which usually supported our subjugation and always acknowledged our inferiority. But that would have deprived the Africans of any voice whatsoever in a culture which could never have heard the argument, and never have responded constructively.

Africans chose to retain the religion which offered no intellectual defense, but rejected the church institutions by forming their own churches. With centuries of hindsight, I can imagine no alternative genuinely available to them. Nevertheless even now I cannot imagine how they found this position intellectually tolerable. Hindsight also allows me to point out how much of their choice crippled Africans of the United States during the nineteenth century. For it seems to me transparent that a large contingent of our intellectuals rejected Christianity, but were not allowed to say so. Again and again our writers condemned Christians while declaring their faith in Christianity (without any supporting arguments). Often, as in the case of Frederick Douglass, the undercurrent of hostility to Christianity seems barely repressed. Others accept the logical extension of Richard Allen's apostasy by accepting Christianity but proposing emigration.

In sum, the African intellectuals in America faced an intellectual impasse at the end of the nineteenth century, and of necessity adopted an intellectually indefensible position. Only a foolish response to history would call the decision wrong, but it would also be foolish to ignore its harmful influence on subsequent discourse.

The second crisis was not about religion. It was about identity, and, so far as I know it, it introduced our century long onomastic obsession. By the end of the century, America had officially embarked upon recrudescant oppression of us. Americans justified their oppression through science and theology, both of which proved their assertions about race. By now, of course, among honest intellectuals 'race' is recognized as a social construct incompatible with any scientific biology. Nevertheless even then and for them, all definitions of race were (and remain) ultimately dependent upon **physical characteristics rather than ancestry**. But Americans defined race by ancestry and only incidentally by physical characteristics. When parentage

in a socially defined category determines or influences all of one's roles in the society, then the category is one of caste and not race. In other words, by the end of the century Americans were using racist doctrines as pretext for oppressing a caste, not a race. In the effort to create an impassible barrier between us and themselves, Americans avoided the unmanageable gradations inevitable in any policy based on race. Instead they legislated a simple caste system.

This development created a crisis for African American intellectuals. Because the Americans chose a principle of caste rather than race to define "Negroes," the category inevitably included some persons who are by race Caucasian but by caste Negro; they are quite obviously white, but they are 'blacks'. The caste includes even more people who are by appearance, that is by 'race,' only marginally African. Furthermore America insisted that this category, 'Negro' would be maintained as a caste, regardless of the social class differences among its members. No attributes of character or achievement or influence can emancipate a person from the caste she or he is born into.

American insistence on absolute caste destroyed the central premise of the nineteenth century African American thought. For Negroes there was no longer any role or goal in America which is rationally or morally defensible. For the individual, proving oneself 'better' than most whites (more intelligent, more learned, more industrious, more pious, more 'refined') became a pointless travesty, if the goal is to earn the respect reserved to human beings. For the caste as a whole, the demand for equity or 'equality' could not be based on merit, because the society find actual equality incredible, inconceivable. Again, as a century before, there was no tenable philosophy to respond to the situation which the forces of history had created. There was no known analysis or ideology or religion which could provide an intellectually tenable prescription for the future.

What choice did African Americans make in this intellectual crisis? Booker T. Washington's accommodation was immensely practical, immensely productive. But it was of course logically and morally indefensible if one believes that we are as human as the Americans. Most of the elite intellectuals, however, adopted an alternative view which won the allegiance of most African American intellectuals throughout the 20th century.

African American intellectuals denounced the oppression, but with a certain ambivalence. Again and again our intellectuals proposed that 'Negroes,' the 'colored' people whom America was oppressing, consisted of two distinct groups. One group of Negroes the larger (and darker), rightfully

could be denied full participation in American society, since we had not proved worthy and, *by Nature*, are unworthy. However, those who held this position consistently also argued that the great unwashed did not deserve the level of oppression we were receiving. But the other group of colored people (some guessed about ten percent of us) deserved full equality with Americans because by the quality of their lives and by the proximity of their appearance, there is no just basis for discrimination. The argument held that obvious merit should be rewarded with the mantle of humanity. But of course such people were usually the scions of privilege, and often the privilege was the gift of Caucasian progenitors. In other words, African American intellectuals stridently argued that America should distinguish between decent Negroes and me. In effect, I claim, they were proposing a kinder, gentler racism. This is a subtext I find ineluctable in the works of Charles Chesnutt, DuBois, Francis Harper, and many others. But America's conception of Nature was never subtle enough to accord any members of our caste a status equal to their own. The only possible accommodation which America could have made to our elite's claims would have been to adopt the triple (or multiple) caste system prevalent in the other Americas rather than United States' bizarre two caste system, which thrusts the most educated, sophisticated, prosperous, and phenotypically Caucasian Negroes into the same category as people like me, with all the deficits of African ancestry. In any case, in the first half of the 20th century, all intellectual circles in America understood that America has a caste system founded on supposed racial distinctions.

Given the biological, historical and sociological facts, the African American position was far more reasonable than the prevailing American position. Furthermore, the argument was always made on the grounds of merit, character, sensibilities, education, prosperity and achievement. The genetic corollary was left to indirection, inference, physical descriptions, and encoded associations. It was an unwittingly racist argument, but far less hypocritical than the thinking of Americans a century before, and far more just and humane than the thinking of coeval Americans. But again it would be foolish to censure. It is important to note that although they insisted on being distinguished from black people, these intellectuals never proposed abandoning me. On the contrary, their fiction and their biographies are rife with heroes and heroines bent on 'uplifting the race' from degradation. There was a racism of *noblesse oblige* quite familiar to residents of Atlanta until legislative desegregation.

Second, the American refusal to allow the distinction was of incalculable advantage to all of us. Until the astounding reversal of the last

two decades, the political and economic interests of African Americans were never allowed to diverge into two camps of essentially conflicting interests. There was never a zero-sum universe in which the interests of the middle class were in diametrical opposition to the aspirations or needs of the lower class. Had there been two castes (rather than one caste with a continuum of varying classes), there could never have been the level of unity which served us so well until the end of legal Jim Crow.

Once the enormous importance of that unity is recognized, we can also note that the Americans' refusal to acknowledge a distinction did not erase that distinction within the caste. African American culture never escaped the debilitating concept that among us there are those who are genetically 'talented' enough to be accommodated comfortably within the context of American society as a whole, and those of us who *inherently* lack adequate 'talent', which includes character. Perhaps nowhere can one find this racist subterfuge more transparent than in the vile claim that "anyone can succeed in America if you try hard enough." Perhaps inanity exceeds deceit when the phrase changes to: "...if you want to badly enough." Is it possible to imagine such nonsense being uttered in a society with an indispensable caste system?

Third, let us be very, very clear about this: No society ever consciously decides to create a caste system, and no society can decide to dismantle one. Whatever ideas or laws or customs a society has for dealing with caste exist to acknowledge and respond to ineluctable facts ordained by God or Nature. In the mind of every person acculturated to life in America, it is God who made the distinction between Negroes and human beings. American laws past and present, repudiated or applauded, are all perceived as attempts to respond to facts, and certainly not as what they are: a society's creation of metaphysical truth.

Finally, I emphasize that the distinction between race and caste has become critical as never before. In the eighteenth century American racism as regards the Negro gradually congealed into a practice equivalent to caste. That is, originally slaves were indentured servants who like white slaves, would normally earn freedom and join the ranks of the white lower classes. Gradually laws were passed to make the slavery of Africans presumptively permanent, and even to restrict the possibility of manumission. The ideological basis was racist; the social structure was only evolving into a caste; there was no conflict between race and caste.

By contrast, at the end of the nineteenth century, there was a large and vocal group of persons who were neither fully Caucasian nor mainly

African. And there were many who, though fully African, had attained sufficient income and education to avoid the usual pattern of deprivation and exploitation. Adopting a system of caste now meant, **in practice** abandoning the principle of race. Americans adopted the principle of caste, but continued to think that they were responding to race. In time this misconception became so profound that now no one ever speaks of the Negro caste, and most people, regardless of their own caste, have no knowledge that America has a rigid caste system underpinning a very mobile class structure. Because of this fundamental misunderstanding, Americans do not understand that they have a system with only two castes - normal human beings and Negroes. All of their ethnic rivalries, fluctuating hostilities, and scurrilous abuse of Native Americans occur within this context which distinguishes the descendants of their slaves from everybody else in the world.

Considering that America is a European country in its culture, America is quite astoundingly non-racist. Even though the original oppression of Africans was rationalized on the principle that black people are irremediably inferior to white ones, that argument has retreated to the most intractable recesses of the American mind. In fact, Africans themselves are accorded full status as human beings. Both here and in Africa, Americans go to great lengths to explain to Africans that we Negroes essentially differ from them, Africans, as much as we differ from everyone else in the world. Every American employer would rather hire an African than African American. And as the bizarre case of Colin Powell demonstrates, even descendants of African slaves in other countries are not really included in our caste. [All biographies of Powell emphasize that he is the son of immigrants.] It is no longer true that an African American can be defined as a citizen with some known African ancestry. An African American is a person known to have an ancestor in the United States who was a **slave** of African descent. The caste is no longer 'descendant of Africa'. The caste is 'descendant of 'our' slaves.'

The African American community has never come to accept the fact that the American concept of reality will forever prevent Americans from perceiving the descendants of their slaves as persons worthy to participate fully and equitably in their society. For two centuries virtually all African American ideologies can be placed in one of two over-simplified categories: integration or separation. As a practical alternative most options of separation can be dismissed. Ever since Abraham Lincoln wept on learning that even a modest rate of natural increase alone would prevent them from shipping us all elsewhere, anywhere, emigration has been impossible for the community as a whole. The Americans' God told them to massacre every

single native on this continent, and they remain convinced that God gave them this land, and also that *mirabile dictu* they earned it. Such a people is not likely to yield a parcel of their divine patrimony to their slaves' descendants. The most lamentable fact of African American history is quite easily stated: We're stuck here.

So we are also stuck with all the permutations and complexities of various programs for living with the Americans. And no error has been more attractive and destructive than the belief that there is some course of action by which we can or could with their cooperation become Americans. By citizenship we are American. By culture and ancestry we have longer and purer ties to the country than most Americans. But in neither Toledo nor Tokyo, in Lagos nor Los Angeles, nowhere in the world would a person refer to one of us as an American unless the hearer already knew his subject was the other kind of American, the Negro, by any other name.

Negro, of course, was the official name of our caste. In rejecting that word, and 'colored' which served as a euphemism for Negro, African Americans seemed to think that they were thereby modifying social reality. When the camouflage of 'Afro-American' proved pointless, we adopted 'African American.' By then, however, Africans had learned that Americans do not tar them with brush reserved for us. Therefore, while most Africans happily acknowledge commonalities of cultural heritage and political interests, some Africans resent our quest for dignity at their expense. [I cannot imagine that Poles berate those who call themselves Polish Americans.] A people have a right to decide their name, and to change that name at will. Nevertheless the relative indifference that Native Americans have shown to their names in this century invites instructive comparison.

All this brings me to the current crisis. Suddenly Americans are systematically introducing and reinforcing conceptual divisions within the Negro caste. In the next census, for example, there will be a racial category equivalent to 'mulatto'. In most surveys certain people have to choose between the ethnic category 'Hispanic', and the caste distinction, 'white' or 'black'; in other surveys only Hispanics are asked to specify both caste and ethnicity. But the most important division has been created by systematically closing all doors to poor blacks: no schools, no jobs, no form of social security, unrestricted access to drugs and guns, etc. while continuing to admit privileged blacks into the lower echelons of stability and security.

Personally, I am convinced that each brick of this prison wall is placed with complete self-righteous conviction that America is doing what is necessary and what is just. For two centuries all Negro achievement was

perverted to reinforce the caste system, through the simple 'exception thesis.' The exception thesis holds that whenever one is forced to acknowledge that an African American does not fit the culture's serotype, he - or more likely, she - is the exception which proves the rule. After all, if she did it, all the others could also have done it if they tried hard enough, or wanted to, enough. The exception thesis has now been raised to the level of a category. Every Negro individual and group now has exactly what they deserve; allowing them to earn more can only be achieved through unjustly depriving real people of something they deserve. We are told constantly, and Americans believe fervently, *that the black 'underclass' is poor by the perversity of their will, and that perversity is an ineluctable part of their biological nature. The American political and economic structure is not the cause of their suffering. On the contrary, there has been no more destructive, unjust and even evil trend in the past thirty years than the American misguided effort to fight God and Nature by fostering their entrance into 'the mainstream.'* That frame of reference is **not** dishonesty motivated by malice or greed. The self-righteous piety of the most strident voices is undeniable. Furthermore Americans both individually and as a nation spend exorbitant sums to maintain the edifice of caste. Dismantling the caste system would give an immense boost to the American economy and to communal serenity. Americans do not give up their caste system because they cannot. God and Nature have ordained that there is no alternative.

In the last quarter of the 20th century Americans have exacerbated the disparity between their social conditions and ours. Simultaneously the exception thesis is being used to create the division that African Americans proposed a century ago. But there's a devastating difference. Relief is granted to the privileged Negroes only on the condition that they internalize the American perception of reality and the American social morality. Gone is the principle of *noblesse oblige*. To have 'escaped the ghetto' becomes the basic mark of respectability. To 'give something back to the community' becomes the exceptional virtue among those who fit the exception thesis. In short, America has succeeded in fragmenting the African American community in decisive ways, both on the basis of birth and on the basis of class.

In the same period, the African American community has been completely deprived of voice unanointed by white America. There are no newspapers or journals whose existence could continue without the financial support of white institutions. There are no nationally known intellectuals or leaders who are not completely dependent upon white people for their income. The one exception, of course, is Louis Farrakhan, who is therefore

daily vilified in every medium accessible to African Americans. In other words, aside from the Nation of Islam, we have no instruments of communication and no national communicators who are not owned and controlled by persons who define themselves by their difference from us, all of us, not just the underclass. We have no way to speak to each other independently. And we cannot choose any leaders without their permission. On the contrary, they openly dictate scripts to all our known political and intellectual voices. We celebrate as heroes only the persons whom they first anoint. We respect as artists and thinkers only those whom they anoint. Whom they depose, we ignore. And in foreign policy, whatever they propose, we accept. Ever since the Second World War we, as a people have been silent to every vicious act of imperialism that the American have perpetrated around the world. [And in what year have they not committed some atrocity which we, as a community knew to be evil.] Even in domestic affairs we have accepted the constraint which allows us only to echo some of them or to discuss how a issue particularly impacts upon Negroes. We never speak as citizens; always as Negroes.

We are fragmented as never before. Weaponless as never before. Leaderless as never before. These are conditions faced by the Negro caste as a whole. It is a crisis greater than the focus of this paper. I am only addressing the intellectual crisis, a small but critical aspect of the current situation. In this new situation Americans feel that nothing could be more unfair than granting us equality, and all signs of our 'progress' are the result of their unfairness to themselves. In this situation what programs or principles could we enlist?

More importantly the dominant principle throughout the whole history of African American thought has now been discredited. We have learned that integration is devastation. I am not talking about its attendant loss of cultural uniqueness in language, arts, cuisine, or customs. I am talking about the intensified segregation that integration has brought, and the intensified repression: rising infant mortality, corrupted education, and multiplied prisons. And to the material deprivation has been added a new spiritual desolation with epidemic resort to direct and indirect forms of suicide. Integration has created for Negroes a kind of ghetto worse than anything our parents or forefathers could have imagined.

Since separation is a daydream, and integration is a nightmare brought to reality, the most active intellectual currents which are not dictated by Americans are the schools of philosophic separatism. They are sometimes religious, sometimes secular. The Nation of Islam, the Black Church of

Reverend Cleage, the Hebrews and the Yorubas are examples of the religious separatists. Secular separatism is most prominently represented by Afrocentricity.

Religious and secular separatism have in common their reliance on etiological mythology. Worse, their myths all adopt European racism, and are therefore dissatisfying to any intellectuals who reject the metaphysical and conceptual premises of European myopia or racism. If you regard Judaism and Christianity as merely examples of human religions, with no more validity than say, Mayan or Maori religion, then you find no comfort in learning that Christ or the Israelites were 'really black.' If you know that Africinity is not the distinguishing characteristic of African Americans, you gain little comfort from learning that ancient Egyptians were African or Black. If you know that such terms as white or Caucasian or black or Negroid are grotesque anachronisms when applied to ancient Egyptians, their racial identity becomes a nonsense issue. Both the religious and the secular mythologies are astoundingly shackled to European concepts of reality and values.

Most of these movements judge Europeans by European standards and, of course, find Europeans wanting. They build for their members codes of conduct which mirror Europe's concepts and idealized codes. Afrocentricity alone, in my opinion has rested its case upon scholarship rather than revelation. And Afrocentricity more than most, I think, has presented racism as merely one manifestation of the Europeans' despicable moral universe. Afrocentricity seeks to emancipate itself from a European frame of reference. But the chosen alternative is ancient Egypt! (Which, they proudly admit, was the origin of European philosophy and religion!) It is hard for me to imagine a more ironic choice for African Americans to make.

For me, Egypt distinguishes itself for two aspects of extraordinary achievement: technology and words. Egyptians created incredible, inexplicable wonders of architecture, human physiology, mythology, and verbal declarations. We may notice in passing that these are the two realms of American excellence. Americans lead the world in technology and in nice-sounding declarations of social principle which are ignored or perverted in American practice.

But in my brief introduction to Egyptian history, standing in awe at many temples and tombs, nothing impressed me more than the folly, the waste, and above all the appalling social injustice which was the essence of Egyptian culture. Imagine it. For four thousand years an entire society devotes all of its amassed resources to building habitations so that the small

elite will be able to continue for eternity their pampered exploitation of the masses here on earth. The pyramids are awesome; their purpose is revolting. As a social order, ancient Egypt must appall us. It shocks me that anyone could look to Egypt as a model for morality, philosophy, religion, or justice. That an African American could look there is doubly ironic, for the skills and the evil of ancient Egypt are similar to, but much more extreme than those of the United States.

Nevertheless Afrocentricity seems to me to be the only school which makes the first step, the step which events and reason and the plainest tenets of morality demand. Afrocentricity insists that we **cannot** and **must not** seek to be Americans. Jews were not allowed to become Nazis, but who is in a better position to know that Nazism was an unspeakable evil. Palestinians cannot become Israelis (even when they are citizens, even when it is their ancestral land), but who is in a better position to know that Israel commits unspeakable evils in the name of God. Who in the whole world has more moral obligation than we to show to the whole world, by our example and our principles that the American way of life is fundamentally evil. Surely we must acknowledge that many societies in the world treat some of their members worse than Americans treat us. But the American treatment of us is merely the most visible and ugly domestic manifestation of their fundamental vision of human nature, human aspirations, human decency. Afrocentricity declares, and I agree: if we do not seek to be different from the Americans, then we deserve the contempt which the world now showers upon us, and which history will confirm.

In conclusion, I see no school of thought, no program, which offers the slightest intellectually cogency for leading African Americans out of the current desert. But I have been describing an intellectual crisis, a lack of viable theory. I have not, except incidentally, been describing the real social crisis in which 35 million people must live, day by day. If 300 years of experience continue to hold, we will survive, even though now Americans have no principles that we can enlist or appeal to, and now, for the first time, we ourselves have no tenable principles which define our goals, and map strategies to reach them.

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